

Emissary of the Void, Part IV

By Greg Keyes; Illustration by Dave Dorman

Vega Sepen glimpsed the shadow of death on the long-range scanner. To the untrained eye, it wasn't much, just a pale green oblong blip. To her experienced eye, it was a Yuuzhan Vong frigate.

Her experience came from hard lessons. She'd been a junior tactician on the pirate vessel *Free Lance* with Urias Xhaxin when she first laid eyes on the living ships of the Yuuzhan Vong. Back then, the extragalactic race had been little more than a rumor. The battle-hardened crew of the *Free Lance* had lost the skirmish in seconds, escaping only by making a blind hyperspace jump.

Since then, the Yuuzhan Vong had conquered half of the galaxy. Vega Sepen was no idealist. At twelve she'd been left homeless and friendless on the streets of Eriadu when her Corellian parents were killed in a reactor meltdown. She'd escaped that life at fifteen by stowing away on a smuggler's ship. They'd almost spaced her, but she'd challenged the first mate to a vibrodagger duel. She got her chance because the crew thought it would be amusing to see what an adult Nikto could do to a silver-haired human girl who stood barely 1.3 meters tall. The mate had been tough, and he'd been fast -- she still had a scar on her cheek to remind her of that -- but he hadn't been fast enough.

She'd changed ships often in the next ten years, finally ending up with Xhaxin, which seemed a good place to be.

Until the Yuuzhan Vong came along.

No, she wasn't a save-the-galaxy type, but for the Vong she'd made an exception. Unless they were stopped, they would certainly kill every sentient in the galaxy that did not become their slave.

She'd tried the military, but while her skills were adequate, her attitude was incompatible.

So she'd ended up with rescue, and eventually Uldir Lochett and his Jedi extraction-and-transport team, and now here, staring at what might very likely be her death.

She scratched her armpit and yawned, then keyed on the comlink. "You two are taking your sweet time," she said. "The frigate hasn't seen us yet, but it's only a matter of an hour or so. When it does see us, we're dust."

"We're working as fast as we can," Leafa growled. "This hardware is more than a century old."

"And it probably won't work," Vook added, despondently.

"Wrong attitude," Vega told them both. "It's the Boss's luck that we found this hulk at all, and he's counting on us. So you'll *make* it work, and you'll hurry."

She keyed off the comm and regarded the arid, pock-marked surface of the nameless asteroid the *No Luck Required* now rested on. It wasn't much as asteroids went, a rock eight kilometers in diameter and too smooth to offer good hiding spots, which was what they had come to the Wayland system's Trojan points looking for. They'd found something better -- the crumpled wreck of what had once been a battle cruiser. From the look of it, the ship was pre-Imperial, and a curious part of Vega wondered how it had ended up here, in a system so far from everything that the late, unlamented Emperor had used it as a secret base. She wondered what had brought it down, too, but was grateful that whatever had caused its crash had left three of its hyperdrive motivators intact, because if she and her companions stood any chance of leaving the system alive, it rested on restoring their own ailing hyperdrive capability.

Now they had the parts, which was more than they had dreamed of a few hours before. All they had to do was fit them into their own damaged ship, fly back to Yuuzhan Vong infested Wayland, find their captain -- if he was still alive -- pull him out of whatever trouble he was in, run the gauntlet yet again, and hope there weren't any interdictors in the system.

If they managed all of that, and if the Boss had been successful in his mission, then their only worry would be how to keep a dark Jedi captive long enough to get her to Master Skywalker.

"Life gets more interesting every day," Vega murmured.

She watched the shadow of death change course again.

"Uvee?" She said.

Still re-routing shields, the UV002 astromech's reply scrolled across her display. *Estimate full efficiency in 6.8 standard minutes.*

"That's great," Vega replied. "But the frigate just changed course again. Can you run an analysis of their new search pattern?"

Sure thing, the droid cheerfully replied. There was a brief pause. *Estimate twenty-eight standard minutes before search grid discloses our location*, the droid finally offered.

"Oh, hurrah," Vega grunted. Her hour had just been chopped in half. So it was a pleasant surprise when Vook's voice came back over the comm only a few moments later, sounding a shade less than hopeless, which from Vook might as well have been a shout of jubilation.

"The installation is complete," the Duro said.

"Uvee?"

Shields to maximum efficiency.

"Terrific," Vega said. "Let's fly."

"We don't have the fuel," Vook said. "The tank had a stress fracture. We leaked what we didn't burn coming here. The damage is repaired, but we need more juice."

"What about the old ship? Any fuel left in her tanks?"

"I already thought of that," Leafth growled. His voice sounded like he was inside of a metal box.

"Leafth, where are you?" Vega asked suspiciously.

"Where do you think?" The Dug replied, testily. "I'm connecting a fueling hose to this piece of junk. Looks like there's enough left in there to get us going."

"You went outside without permission?"

"Hey, don't go thinking you're the Boss, Sepen," Leafth said. "I already have to take orders from one human. I'm not taking them from two."

"Really?" Vega's voice sounded cold, even to her. "We might have to have a chain-of-command discussion one of these days." *Maybe with stun batons.*

"Any time, sweetness," Leafth replied. "There. Hooked in."

She could see him near the wreckage, an ungainly figure in his vacsuit. She took a deep breath to calm herself. After all, the Dug was only doing what needed done. He should have checked with her first, but -- *let it go*. The last thing they needed at the moment was to fight among themselves.

She'd be glad when they got the captain back. Though she couldn't imagine how, he somehow managed to keep this ridiculous crew in line. A few silent moments passed, and for five minutes or so, things went surprisingly smoothly. Vega watched the fuel indicators swing beyond the halfway mark.

Which was about the time Leafth said, "Oops."

"What? What's that?" Vega asked.

But at that moment, something flashed outside, sun bright, and the asteroid rocked beneath them.

From his mooring station, Uvee stuttered out an electronic shriek.

* * *

Uldir Lochett aimed his blaster at the oncoming Yuuzhan Vong warriors but didn't fire.

They weren't in range yet, so he didn't want to waste any shots. Not that he would get that many when they were in range. Klin-Fa Gi might kill half a dozen of them with her lightsaber if she fought as well as, say, the fabled Corran Horn or Anakin Skywalker. She wouldn't, because she wasn't -- she'd had trouble enough taking out a single Yuuzhan Vong warrior back on Bonadan. And she was wounded, and tired.

If his own luck held true to form -- and it was usually very good luck -- he might get three or four with his blaster before becoming fertilizer for the greenware field he stood in.

That left the motley fifteen or so sentients who called themselves the Free People. They were armed with bows and stone knives. Against Yuuzhan Vong amphistaves and armor, he figured they had, at best, a chance to take one enemy with them each.

That was being highly optimistic, but hey, why not? The addition on his best-case scenario brought him to a grand total of about twenty-four deceased Vong. They faced at least twice that number. They couldn't run, either, because the rocky slopes behind them were several hundred degrees centigrade, courtesy of the superheated rock vapor that had just been sprayed from overhead in a perimeter around the Vong camp. The huge, worm-like tubes that had disgorged the plasma still arched above them, not yet retracting toward the enormous cylinder that had sent them out like so many feeding tentacles.

"What did you say?" Klin-Fa Gi asked.

"I didn't say anything," Uldir said, avoiding looking at her. The young Jedi was dark-haired and black eyed. Very pretty. Utterly untrustworthy.

"Though I have plenty to say to you, believe me," he clarified.

"You were moving your lips." Then her brows arched. "Oh. You were counting our enemies. You move your lips when you count?"

"Only when I sum the reasons I should have spaced you when I had the chance." He glanced at her, reluctantly. "Nice outfit, by the way."

"It's the latest," she said.

Last time he had seen her, the young Jedi had worn a Bonadan game-girl's skirt and tights. Now she was clad in a black, form-fitting garment of Yuuzhan Vong biofacture.

The warriors were now perhaps sixty meters away, still too far for a clean shot.



He fired anyway. He missed, but he hit a rock that exploded prettily. One of the Vong clutched at his face, evidently with a shard of stone in his eye.

"Lucky," Klin-Fa commented.

"Yeah," Uldir agreed, "incredibly so. Not only do I get to die, I get to die in your company." He grinned fiercely. "At least you won't have a chance to use whatever dark side toy you got from the Emperor's warehouse." He took another shot. This struck a warrior, but glanced from the Vondun crab armor he wore.

"What in the name of the Sith are you on about?"

"Sith is right, you--" He suddenly noticed the glossy, six-limbed humanoid who led the Free People doing something peculiar about a meter away from him.

"Txer, what are you up to?" Uldir asked. Whatever it was seemed to involve a coil of rope. Was the Myneyrshi going to try lassoing a Yuuzhan Vong?

"Offworlders free to fight Cut-Up-People," Txer replied. "Fight all you want with shame weapons. Free People fight another time." With that, he tossed the looped end of the rope up into the air. Uldir noticed that the rest of the Free People seemed to be doing the same.

Yuuzhan Vong battle cries rang out as Uldir understood what Txer and his band were doing. The air filled with whirring as some of the Yuuzhan Vong threw something at them.

Thudbugs, Uldir thought dully. They were a species of modified beetle the Yuuzhan Vong used for ranged weapons. He fired in the vague hope of hitting at least one of the many that probably had his name on it.

Then Klin-Fa Gi was suddenly in front of him, her lightsaber a double-infinity of light. Burning thudbugs zinged off at improbable tangents. Uldir fired around her, trying to hit the joints in the warrior's armor, but to no obvious effect.

Meanwhile, their erstwhile allies, the Free People, were climbing up their ropes as quickly as they could. They had noticed what Uldir hadn't; that the exteriors of vapor tubes above them were covered in knobby protrusions. Txer and his bunch had thrown the loops of their ropes around these and were pulling themselves up and away from the conflict. Thudbugs killed two, and two more fell from insufficiently secure purchase, but the rest seemed to be escaping.

Someone grabbed Uldir from behind. He turned to find the Psadan he had rescued from the inferno only moments before. "Climb," the Psadan grunted, thrusting the dangling end of a rope at him.

"You go," Uldir said. "I'll follow."

Which he wouldn't, of course, because there wasn't time. The howling warriors were on them.

The Psadan pushed past Uldir and bowled into the Yuuzhan Vong like the near-sphere he was. He had a stone ax in each hand, and as Uldir watched he struck one Vong warrior in the throat and another in the forehead. Both hit the Psadan with their amphistaves, of course, but the weapons glanced off of the native's natural armor.

"Come on," Klin-Fa shouted. She had already started up the proffered rope.

"You go," Uldir said. The Vong were splitting around the enraged Psadan like a stream around boulders. Uldir shot two at near pointblank range. Both pitched back, but they looked like they would probably get up.

"Don't be a fool. He gave you a gift. Don't waste it."

Uldir's throat clutched. She was right. Despite his armor, the Psadan had no chance, and neither did Uldir. He could die helping the Waylander, or he could live to fight another day.

And incidentally, to do something about the dark Jedi escaping from under his nose. Or above it, in this case.

He shot frantically and grabbed the rope, but he had hesitated too long. The blaster would keep them back only for instants; he would never have time to climb, even if he could use both hands, which he could not.

And then something tried to pull his arm off, and air was whistling by him, and the Yuuzhan Vong were faces below him, shouting. Groaning, Uldir dropped his blaster and clutched the rope with both hands, fighting the force of acceleration that was trying to push him back down to the surface of Wayland.

The vapor tubes were finally retracting, retracing their long arcs through the sky and pulling Klin-Fa, the Free People, and Uldir Lockett back toward the giant, barrel-shaped mining worm.

Pulling them back fast.

This is going to hurt, Uldir imagined.

Above him, Klin-Fa was still climbing, and was just reaching the tube itself. He heard her exclaim when she touched it.

Looking back down, he noticed specks following them. More thudbugs. He watched them wax larger, wishing he still had the blaster, knowing he could never use it even if he did; his left arm was in agony, and he needed his right to hang on. He began climbing as best he could, which wasn't very well. The surface of the jungle moon receded to a patchwork of green and dun enclosed in a vast black arc as the deadly insects hurtled closer and closer, until they were near enough for him to make out the details of their chitinous forms. Then, meters away, they began to lose the race. They receded to dots and vanished just as Uldir managed to get a grasp on the vapor ejector.

With a grimace, he discovered the reason for Klin-Fa's cry. The tube was still hot from expelling plasmic effluvium. He flinched, and his weight shifted to his bad arm, still holding the rope.

A small hand caught his wrist and pulled at it with surprising strength. "No, you don't," Klin-Fa said.

It was scalding, but once the surprise was past, not unbearable. With the Jedi's help, he managed to clamber onto the tube. They were past apogee now, and as the conduit withdrew into the mining worm it came closer and closer to vertical with respect to the ground.

What was worse, unless the sleeve that the thing had come out of was much larger than the pipe, he and the Jedi would be scraped off when it was fully withdrawn.

"We have to get in the hollow end," Klin-Fa said.

"Right," Uldir huffed. "I get that part."

Ignoring the vertigo from rapidly shifting equilibrium as best they could, the two managed to crawl into the end of the pipe. Uldir entered first, braced himself against the walls with his back and feet, and worked his way down about two meters. Klin-Fa took a similar position above him.

They were just in time, for through the opening they now saw only sky.

"Well," Klin-Fa said, "At least we got out of that."

Even as she said it, a sudden jolt of deceleration dislodged the Jedi and sent her smashing into Uldir, and they both fell down the now-vertical cylinder.

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"Yes, that hurt," Uldir said.

He and the young Jedi were a painful tangle of limbs in the u-shaped concavity where the pipe turned briefly horizontal before continuing its downward plunge into the belly of the mining-beast. Uldir's dislocated shoulder hurt more than ever, but at least now it had plenty of company -- his aching head, his bruised legs, and a cracked rib or two.

"Oh, don't complain," Klin-Fa said. "At least we're still alive." Her voice startled him, because in the near darkness he hadn't realized her lips were right next to his ear. He felt her breath on it and was suddenly aware that one of her arms lay across his chest and her head was in the nestle of his shoulder. He could feel her heart beating.

He could feel his own, too, suddenly changing tempo.

Dark Jedi, he reminded himself. *Very Bad. I came here to stop her.*

"Can you move?" He asked.

"Right," she said, softly. "Like you want me to."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Hey, the Force is a powerful ally."

"Don't do that! Keep out of my head."

Her voice hardened. "Hey, Lockett? Don't you know a joke when you hear it? You, know, levity in a dark situation and all that?"

Oh. "Sure. I was playing along. Come on, let's jet out of here."

She shifted off of him, and he sat up.

"We'd better fix that first," she said, taking him by the arm.

"No, now, wait--" But then she twisted and shoved, and sheets of nebular fire coruscated across his vision.

"Ow!" he gasped. But his arm was back in its socket. "That could have waited," he muttered.

"No way. I'm not hauling you back up that thing. You have to climb yourself." She paused thoughtfully. "Where's your ship, anyway?"

"I wish I knew," Uldir said. "It's lucky to be anywhere after what you did to it."

He expected a tart reply, but instead he got a pause.

"Look," she finally said, "I'm sorry about that. It's just -- you don't understand how important it was I come here. Every free sentient in the universe is depending on me. And--"

"And what?" Uldir snapped. "And you figured my crew and I were expendable? Fine, but if you were going to leave us to die you might have at least given us a hint as to what we were dying for. Though I think I've figured it out."

"--and I didn't want to involve you," she continued. "After I was done here I planned to bring your A-wing back and help you return to civilization."

It rang with conviction, and for an instant Uldir believed it.

But then, someone strong in the Force could make you believe, couldn't they?

"Let's just get out of here," he said. "If we survive -- which isn't all the likely -- we can talk about it then."

* * *

"Leaft!" Vega yelled. "What's going on out there?"

"*Hufgeb hsiel merht*," the Dug swore, then, in Basic, "How should I know?"

Vook appeared at Vega's elbow.

"There," he said, pointing. "We've woken something up."

Power systems engaged, configuration unknown, Uvee confirmed. Weapons targeting detected.

Something roughly spherical was rising from the wreckage. It was dark, with latitudinal strips of light that pulsed on and off. Its shadow fell across Leaft.

"Leaft, get out of there!"

"Advice I don't need!" Leaft answered. She could see his vac-suited form, already sprinting toward the ship on all fours.

A spear of yellow light appeared, sending up a plume of vaporized asteroid half a meter from the Dug. He yowled and dodged.

"Get to the turret, Vook," Vega snapped. "Now."

She began flipping switches, powering up the systems.

"Uvee, what in the unhealthy name of Emperor is that thing? Is it Yuuzhan Vong?"

Negative. Systems not biotic. Possibly droid or synthetic intelligence piloting.

Outside, Leaft dodged another bolt, even closer than the last.

"Its aim's improving," Vega muttered. She cut the shields in as Leaft vanished around the curve of the ship, scuttling for the cargo hatch. She hoped he made it within the perimeter of the energy shields before the thing fired again.

"Let's try a distraction," Vega said, aiming the forward guns and ticking off a round.

Her beams were dead center, but the ship -- or whatever it was --revealed itself to be shielded as well. Other than the faint glow of particles spreading against an invisible barrier, her firing had no result.

Or rather, it didn't result in damage. She certainly got its attention. Two beams arrowed out this time, one presumably directed at Leaft and the other jabbing straight toward her. The shields absorbed it, but her indicators jumped off the scale.

"Leaft?"

"I'm in, Sepen," the Dug's voice came over the comm. "I suggest we haul out of here."

"For once we agree," Vega replied. She switched on the repulsorlifts, uncoupled the fuel hose with the emergency bolts, and engaged the ion drive. The *No Luck Required* leaped free of the asteroid's negligible gravity and into free space.

The strange ship came after them.

"It resembles a battle drone from the Clone Wars," Vook said, abstractedly. "Though I can't place the specific model, so I could be wrong."

"It's time someone told it the Clone Wars are long over," Vega said.

"Well, *tell* it." Leaft snapped, shouldering into the cabin. "You have the comm."

"Yes," Vega said. "I was a bit too busy saving your dusty pelt to engage in conversation. Now I'm trying to fly. You hail it."

"Me? Let Vook do it. I'll take his place in the turret. He shoots only marginally better than a human."

"No time for substitutions," she said. "See that?" She waved at the long-range scanners. "The Yuuzhan Vong have us spotted now."

The ship rocked and the inertial compensators whined.

"Concussion missile!" Leaft grunted. "Let's hope it doesn't have proton torps."

"Hail it!"

"Urr," Leaft snarled, but he activated the comm.

"This is the *No Luck Required* hailing stupid annoying vessel firing upon us. Cease firing, you idiots."

"Very diplomatic," Vega said. "I'm sure they'll break off any moment now."

"I see no indication they've even heard us," Leaft retorted. "I could ask it for flup in Huttese and it wouldn't make any difference."

The drumming of the turret gun continued as behind them the stranger gained and ahead the Yuuzhan Vong closed.

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"What did you mean back there?" Klin-Fa Gi asked. "About a dark side weapon?"

Following the Free People, they had managed to elude Yuuzhan Vong patrols and re-enter the jungle.

"Oh, I don't know," Uldir replied, tensing. "What's that on your back?" He indicated the spider-like pack that clung to her living bodysuit at the shoulders.

She quirked a little smile. "What I came here to find. But if you think it's something the Emperor built, you're plotting a course without coordinates at either end or in the middle."

"Well, what is it, then?"

"Wait." she stopped, listening. "They're bound to send a hunt after us. Where are they?"

"Hopefully way behind us. We should be able to reach the starfighters before they catch up."

"Maybe."

Something crackled off in the undergrowth, and she reached for her lightsaber. It wasn't there.

Uldir glanced toward the noise too, saw it was one of the Psadan, and relaxed.

"What ... ?" Klin-Fa gasped, still feeling for her missing weapon. Then her eyes narrowed, focusing on Uldir.

"Right," he said, holding her Jedi weapon where she could see it. "I took it off you when we were all tangled up back there."

She tossed her dark hair. "Impossible. I would have known."

"Pride isn't the way of the Jedi, is it?" Uldir asked. "I may not have much Force ability, but it's enough to hide my intentions if there's enough distraction -- and my opponent has so much contempt for me she doesn't give me a second thought."

"So now what?"

"Now you tell me what's going on, or you can try to get this back. Klin-Fa Gi, you've endangered me and my crew for the last time. You say you're on a mission for Master Skywalker, but word is you're dead, and he doesn't know anything about a mission. You say you aren't a dark Jedi, but how am I to believe you at this point, after so many lies?"

She was silent for a long while as they moved quickly through the jungle. They exited the burn zone surrounding the Yuuzhan Vong compound, and strange warblings filled the air as they upset some local fliers.

"I have to tell you this anyway," she said at last, "because I still need your help."

"Then be sure you don't leave anything out."

"I won't. Not this time." She slowed to a fast walk and spoke without looking at him, her eyes darting through the undergrowth.

"I hate not being able to feel the Yuuzhan Vong in the Force," she said. "It makes me feel stupid."

"Yet you managed to enter their camp and leave alive."

"Oh, first you think I'm a dark Jedi, now you think I'm a Vong?"

"It's just suspicious, that's all. And there is the way you're dressed."

"Yeah, well, I know a lot about the Yuuzhan Vong, okay? And about that camp. Almost a standard year ago I was captured by them."

"Captured?"

"Yes. Me and another Jedi, Bey Gandan. We were following Wurth Skidder's lead, posing as captives in hopes of fighting them from within. We ended up getting placed as slaves on a Shaper ship. We didn't even know about Shapers -- we had seen only warriors up until then. The Shapers are the ones who make all the Yuuzhan Vong biotech--"

"I know about Shapers," Uldir said, bluntly.

"Good. That saves me some time, then. Anyway, they put us to work tending a *qahsa*, a living information storage system. A few months ago, they brought us here, to Wayland."

"What are they doing here?"

"The Yuuzhan Vong are intensely interested in the Jedi. They don't exist in the Force, and none of them can sense it, yet they can see that it exists because of what we do with it. They fear us -- so far as I can determine, several different sects of Shapers were put to work on the Jedi 'problem.' They found out about the Emperor, the dark side, and Wayland, and they came here looking for clues. Clues about how to destroy the Jedi."

"And you think they found something."

"They found something, yes. Not what they were looking for, but something deadly -- not just to Jedi but to all of us."

"What exactly did they find?"

"That I don't know. But it was important, and they were convinced it would strike a decisive -- perhaps final -- blow against the New Republic. They coded what they had found into a portable *qahsa* and put it on a ship bound for Tsavong Lah's vessel. Bey and I made our move; we managed to board the ship and sabotage the dovin basals. The ship went wildly off-course and crashed in the Corporate Sector. Bey and I managed to escape and ... ah, borrow a ship. We made it to Bonadan and hid out, built new lightsabers, and tried to get in touch with the New Republic.

"But we discovered the execs were colluding with the Yuuzhan Vong. We also discovered that the *qahsa* we had stolen was useless."

"How so?"

"It was coded -- genetically. Imagine it as locked, able to be opened only by an incredibly complex biochemical key. We had the secret, but not the secret needed to read the secret." She shrugged. "So I had to come back here."

"Wait a minute. What about this Bey fellow? And the *qahsa*?"

The other Jedi's name didn't taste good in his mouth. Something about the way she said it bothered him.

"We decided to split up. We both knew the odds of making it back to Wayland and out again were slim. We figured that even without the genetic key, New Republic scientists might be able to crack the code. So Bey flew toward Coruscant, and I made plans to return to Wayland. The local enforcers caught up with me before I managed to leave, and then you came along."

"I see. And you couldn't have told me this a long time ago?"

"What reason did I have to trust you? The Yuuzhan Vong have allies everywhere."

Uldir shrugged. He couldn't deny that. "And now?" He asked.

"Now I don't have any choice."

"Wait just one minute," Uldir said. "There's a tailwind I don't like here. You said your partner took the qahsa to the New Republic, so he should have told this same story, ultimately to the Jedi. But Master Skywalker is aware of none of this. He still thinks you're dead."

Her eyes dropped. "That's because Bey never made it to Coruscant. That was the other thing I found out when I was in the Shaper compound -- he's been captured. He was here up until a few days ago, for interrogation. Now he's being transferred to a slave convoy."

"And he still has the coded message."

"He ought to. It's small, easily hidden -- and there is no indication in the Shaper records that they found it on him."

"And that thing on your back is the key."

"Correct."

"So, let me guess -- you want me to take on this slave convoy for you. Based on a story from someone I know to be a liar -- a story which, even if I choose to believe it, gives me no assurance that the threat to the galaxy is as dire as you make it out to be."

Klin-Fa Gi stopped and turned her dark eyes directly on him.

"I know I've given you every reason to distrust me. I know you don't like me, but what I'm telling you is true. Whatever the Shapers are planning, it's important. They estimated the number of deaths in the millions or even billions. That much, I did hear."

Her earnestness sent a tremor along Uldir's spine.

* * *

Tsaa Qalu could smell the Jedi and her companion as if they were centimeters away, though they were more than ten meters from him. He followed them easily, noiselessly, and when their pitiful eyes glanced in his direction, he could tell they saw nothing but vegetation.

Of course they did not see him. He was a Yuuzhan Vong hunter, gifted by the gods to track, to see and not be seen, until the moment his claws came down upon their throats, and often not even then.

He could have them now -- he'd meant to, moments before -- but as he listened to their grotesque speech, his plans began to change. When he was sure, he stopped and waited for their voices to recede until even his god-sharpened ears could not hear them.

Soon the sound of his subordinate warriors grew behind him. They did not see him either; only one warrior in a thousand was chosen to incarnate the hunter and wear the cloak of the Nuun. The photosensitive bacteria that lived symbiotically in the surface of the cloak mimicked his surroundings perfectly.

Still, it irritated him to hear Yuuzhan Vong moving almost as clumsily as despised infidels.

He revealed himself with a low growl, and they turned fiercely to face him. He let his cloak relax, allowing to his fellows to see him. "Tsaa Qalu!" his subordinate hissed. "Are they near?"

"They are near enough."

"What is your command? Shall we fall upon them?"

"No. There is a greater hunt here than the capture of a single Jedi and her companion. A much greater hunt, and more glory for the Yuuzhan Vong."

"But our orders . . ."

Tsaa Qalu snarled and chopped his hand. "Shaper's orders," he said, voice wet with contempt. "I have the authority to supersede them. I do."

"A *belek tiu*. Of course." the subcommander saluted.

"Yes, of course. Prepare my ship. We will pursue this quarry to the stars."

* * *

"We've got skips," Leaft said.

Vega could see that for herself. The frigate had launched about a dozen of the starfighters, and they were forming up for a run on the *No Luck Required*.

"That leaves us exactly no place to go," Vega noticed.

"Wrong," Leaft snorted. "It leaves us to find the weakest attacker and go through him."

"Riiight," Vega said. "Any nominations?"

"The coralskippers. Starboard flank."

"I don't think so," Vega said, throwing the ship into a series of evasive maneuvers as long-range plasma bursts plumed by them. "The frigate we might be able to outrun; the drone ship can catch us, I'm sure of it. Either way, if we try to fight through that perimeter of skips, we'll get nailed from behind by one of them." As she spoke, she stenciled the vacuum with the forward lasers.

"If only we knew why the drone ship is attacking us," Vook's voice came from the turbolaser.

"Who knows?" Leaft snapped. "It's more than a century old. It might be a thousand."

"No," Vook said. "The crashed ship wasn't that old. It was a late Old Republic vessel, I'm sure of it."

"Yes, but that thing was *in* it," Vega pointed out. "It could have been cargo, or a special weapon -- it's a complete unknown. We don't even know for sure what got it so angry with us."

"It didn't like my taking the fuel," Leaft said.

"So it would seem." A thought occurred to her. "Leaft, you were closest. Where did this thing come from? Was it inside the wreckage?"

"Urr?" He scratched his head. "I -- I don't think so, no. I think it was behind it, in its shadow. Yes, I think I saw it rise up from behind."

"That was my impression, too," Vega said. "Maybe it's not even contemporary with the Republic ship. Maybe it came along later, for the same reason we did -- to scrounge spare parts. Maybe it couldn't find enough and went into some sort of hibernation mode."

"Until we came along," Vook said. "And now it wants our parts."

"Are you shooting, down there?" Leaft snarled. "I'll never understand this preoccupation you beings have with pointless speculation."

Vega was almost prepared to agree with the Dug, as the ship was struck almost simultaneously by a plasma burst from a coralskipper and a laser blast from the automated ship. She could probably put her brain to better use flying.

But then an idea occurred to her with nearly blinding clarity.

"You like to gamble, don't you Leaft?" She asked, absently.

"Of course," the Dug said. "Provided the game is fixed."

"Sorry, no such assurance here."

"I don't -- *what in the name of space are you doing?*"

"Powering down," she replied, as the ship plunged into darkness and the engines coughed off-line.

"Are you completely insane?" Leaft screeched. He was drowned out by multiple impacts against the hull that would have pasted them both against the bulkhead if they hadn't been strapped into crash couches.

"They're going to cut us to pieces! The next volley--" he broke off. "Urr. They've stopped shooting."

"Sure," Vega drawled. "The Yuuzhan Vong would rather have us as captives. The drone ship wants our spare parts. Neither has any interest in blowing a dead ship out of space."

"You don't know that. That was a guess!"

"The drone stopped shooting, didn't it?"

"Yes," Vook confirmed from below. "I can see it. It's still coming fast, though."

"So is the frigate," Vega said. "The coralskippers are backing off." The frigate loomed alongside them, and as they watched, an opening dilated in the side of the craft and a wormlike tube began to extrude from it.

"You were right," Leafth admitted. "They're going to board us. Nice going. You must be so happy."

"I can't be wrong about this," Vega said.

"I'm deeply comforted by your confidence," the Dug replied.

Vega didn't answer. She watched the tube stretch across the intervening space, breathing through the tightness in her chest.

Then the drone appeared in the upper starboard quadrant of her view, its twin lasers slicing through the Yuuzhan Vong boarding mechanism.

"See?" Vega said, trying not to let her jubilation show.

An instant later, the frigate returned fire, and space was once again an arabesque of plasma blasts and laser fire.

"That's perfect," Vega murmured. "I don't think we'll wait around to see who wins." She began flicking switches, and the ship's systems hummed and burred back to life.

She spun the ship thirty degrees and kicked in the drive.

"We've still got skips on us," Vook said. The turbolaser was pounding again.

"Skips we can deal with," Vega replied.

"There are quite a lot of them," Vook said.

"Then we'll shoot quite a lot of them," Vega snapped. Her jubilation was beginning to fade. The odds were better than they had been, but they still weren't good.

They improved a few seconds later, however, as two A-wings suddenly appeared from the direction of the sun and began dicing yorik coral. "It's the boss!" Leafth shouted.

"And someone else," Vook said.

The comm crackled. "I thought I told you guys to stay out of trouble."

It was Uldir. Relief flushed through Vega like engine coolant.

"We did our best," she said. She glanced at the frigate and the drone, still locked in combat. "I even arranged a show for you."

"Yeah. Remind me to ask about that sometime."

* * *

A few moments later, what remained of the coralskippers retreated back to the frigate, which was suffering heavy damage from the drone. Vega opened the fighter bay and cycled both of the smaller ships in. Then she jumped a light year into the outer system, changed vectors, made another short hop, and then a longer one, to put a few parsecs between them and Wayland.

Only then did she relax. Marginally.

She looked up to see Uldir standing in the doorway. The Jedi was with him.

Leafth noticed her at about the same time and was out of his crash couch in a blindingly fast flurry of appendages. Hurling himself forward with his long upper limbs, he struck Klin-Fa in the chest with both of his lower foot-hands, uttering a wordless snarl. The Jedi, stunned, flew back into the common room and slammed into the bulkhead. Leafth kept coming after her.

"Leafth!" Uldir snapped. "Stop. *Now*."

The Dug paused over the crumpled body, his eyes effulgent with fury. "She's got this coming," he snapped.

"Not without my say-so," Uldir said. "Stand down, Leaf. I mean it."

For a moment, Uldir thought he was going to have to draw on the Dug, but then, with a snarl, Leaf retreated a few steps. Klin-Fa moaned and sat up, her breath coming in painful-sounding wheezes. Uldir felt a brief urge to help her stand.

He suppressed it.

"The Dug's right," Klin-Fa managed, wiping blood from a cut lip. "I had that coming."

"And a good deal more," Vega said. "Boss-boy, why isn't this carbon flush in stuncuffs?"

"I'll explain that soon enough," Uldir replied. "I want a status report first."

Vega's lips compressed in anger, but when she spoke her tone was controlled.

"As you can see, we're hyperdrive capable again. I've put some space between us and Wayland." She glanced at the conn. "Other than that, we've suffered some minor battle damage, nothing that a little time in drydock won't fix."

"That's terrific," Uldir said, meaning it. "I don't know how you managed it, but great work. I'm proud of all of you."

Vega nodded curtly. "We just did what you told us too." Her voice was flat. Inwardly, Uldir sighed. The ship wasn't the only thing that needed patching up, it seemed.

"Plot another jump," Uldir said, "toward the Hydian Way, then rimward."

"The Hydian Way?" Vega repeated, incredulously. "That's still Yuuzhan Vong territory."

"I'm aware of that. When you're done, meet me in the lounge. The rest of you, too. Klin-Fa has some things to tell you, and we have a decision to make."

* * *

"Boss," Vega drawled, when the explanations were done, "with all due respect, it's my opinion that you've lost your mind."

"Or had it lost for you," Leaf speculated, shooting Klin-Fa a look that was pure venom.

"I understand your reactions," Uldir said. "But I think we need to do this."

Vega rolled her eyes. "Leaving aside the fact that we are in no way equipped to take on a slave convoy, I ask you -- once again -- to consider the source."

"I have, believe me," Uldir replied. "But if what Klin-Fa says even *might* be true, we have to risk it."

"Let someone else risk it," Leaf said. "Someone with the guns to live through it."

"Who?" Uldir said. "Given the way the New Republic has been dragging its heels, we can't count on them. They think we have a truce with Yuuzhan Vong. Anyway, you all know what the intelligence situation is like on that end. Two minutes after we reported this to the military, the senate, or anyone else in the Republic, the Yuuzhan Vong would know we were on to them. They have too many collaborators and too many spies."

"Granted," Vega allowed. "But we aren't the only ship Master Skywalker has at his command. What about Booster Terrik and the *Errant Venture*? He's got the firepower needed for this sort of operation."

"We'll certainly try to contact Master Skywalker," Uldir replied.

"I don't think he would send the *Errant Venture*, because the Jedi candidates are on it -- he wouldn't want to risk their lives. But sure, if we can get help we will. But we can't wait for it. Right now, the ship with Gandan on it is only a few days ahead of us, and we know where it's headed. Soon that won't be the case."

"We can't fight a whole convoy," Vega said.

Klin-Fa cleared her throat. "If we hurry we won't have to -- just the slave transport and its escort."

"That's still a lot of ship," Vega said. "The *No Luck Required* isn't a warcraft -- it's a rescue vessel."

"I think we should do it," Vook said.

All eyes turned to the Duro. He returned their gazes impassively. "The Jedi's story aside," he said, "we know for certain what the Yuuzhan Vong do to captives. If we have a chance to save sentient beings from their depredations, it is our duty to do so."

"Vook," Vega began, "We all know how you feel about this--"

"I doubt it," the Duro said, softly. "I very much doubt it."

Silence settled on them. It was several long moments before anyone spoke.

"Urr," Leaf finally growled. "Who wants to live forever, anyway?"

"I do," Vega answered. "But to space with it. Let's go."

To Be Continued...